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Wiebke Leister: 'Echoes and Afterlives'

*Dew whitens into morning. Faintly glowing.
An empty canvas, blank sheet of paper unfolded.
Sleeping through shadows, exposed.*

*Breath fogging a window, face like marble.
Shadow-absorbing powder, thick as mud.
Opaque surface, no more than milky liquid.*

The project 'Echoes and Afterlives' looks at the boundaries between embalming and enmasking: being in a skin and under a skin, in and under a mask, looking at a mask and seeing through a mask as something that equally changes one's gait and one's voice while playing with sensations of displacement and transformation. It treats the human face less as a façade but as an object that – even though central to our understanding of what it means to be human – is only ever in the process of approximating a subject: being filled by a subject, worn on the face of a subject. A process of becoming invested with meaning that might occur during the encounter with an image-object, possibly inverting the relationship of who sees and what can be seen.

Amongst other cultural and philosophical reference points, a main framework for this project has been the teaching of Japanese Noh theatre, in which the mask works as an extension of the actor: it is nuanced like a face, while the face itself is displayed as an impassive mask. This is exemplified in the actor's ritual of holding the mask to face him in an act of greeting, prior to shoeing the mask and stepping onto stage. This moment of face-to-face communication is said to allow the actor to become an other; a symbolic pact of mutual recognition and association (rather than identification), latent with many possible becomings.

When the mask then folds onto the face the actor becomes *enmasked*, while the mask has become *enfaced*, establishing a liminal space between subject and object as the sculpted object folds onto and touches the skin. The actor appears to be one with his mask, while the mask becomes animated – accentuated by the angle of the head and the play of light on its many surfaces, reflecting a flow of ever-changing expressions: a lowered head displaying darker expressions, a head raised towards the light showing brighter emotional states.

Not unlike photography, mask-play consists of emotive light images. But at the same time the liveness of masks is essentially transitory and pro-photographic: they are living images long before the camera captures their movements and expressions. And it is often said that still photography is unable to communicate their infinite changes in mood because these are conveyed by the contrast of an immobile mask-object partly overlaying an actor's moving body – while a photograph would not only take away their progression in time, but also their imaginary constitution by congealing mask and actor into one thing at only one moment.

My project seeks to find ways to visually translate this sense of a living object into photography, because – just like a mask holds a life of its own that aids its performer – photographs are not just passive receivers of looks, but can actively envelop the gaze of their viewers. My work meditates on the moment in space and time when a mask meets a face and how this relationship between object and actor is established across the gap between two surfaces. In this process I am bringing together two artistic gestures: the performer's gesture of donning the mask – and the equally performative gesture of translating both enfaced mask and enmasked face into the photographic plane.

Conceived as diptychs in an exhibition context, the image-pairs strive to invert a conventional understanding of active subject and passive object positions by combining images of insides of masks that seem to change between concave and convex shapes, with images of whitened faces whose static positions remind of classical sculptures. The white here works as a non-representational space: an empty stage, a placeholder or insertion that enables an enacting of imaginary personae who are, similar to Noh characters, seemingly caught in retrospective states. They are sculpted and still, long before photography rendered them immutable, evoking a sense of premonition and awareness.

As part of the printed publication, the double pages of masks and faces actually fold onto each other in the process of moving through the pages, thus literally donning a mask onto a face or shoeing a face into a mask. At the same time the publication includes two kinds of text – the first observing fragments from the actor's moving body on stage, the other combining metaphors of whiteness from different literary contexts into double triplets thus developing other levels of agency, voice and embodiment.

In a performance context, the acting out of the initial publication and its later edited reproduction as a live-collage-projection enabled me to invite different sound artists into the work. These collaborations prompted me to rethink the work not only in relation to a timeline, but also as part of improvisation and rescaling processes, while my own gestures of cutting and folding the pages interacted with the respective sonic environments, which opened up the work through elements of layering, decollage and overwriting.



Exhibition 'Echoes and Afterlives', Photography and the Archive Research Centre, London, 2 May - 24 June 2016.



Performance 'Masking and Enmasking' with David Toop and Emi Watanabe, Kings Place, London, 14 May 2016, 20min (decollaged publication, cutting tools, live projection, various flutes, digital electronics, voice), part of festival 'Noh Reimagined' curated by Akiko Yanagisawa. Publication: 'Echoes and Afterlives' (Fieldstudy 22), Photography and the Archive Research Centre, London, 2016, 33x48cm. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rEdYtDmXtQ>



Performance with NaoKo TakaHashi, 20 Oct 2016, 15min, 4 parts (folded publication, pencil, electro-acoustic amplification with effects pedals, spoken word), during exhibition 'Echoes and

Transformations', White Conduit Projects, London, 20 Oct – 9 Nov 2016. Publication: 'Echoes and Transformations', edition of 40, 2016, 50x70cm. <https://vimeo.com/207486881>



Performance with Kaho Aso, 2 Nov 2016, 15min, 4 parts (folded publication, 4 photographs, scissors, glue, live projection, Noh flute, Kotsuzumi, drum calls), during exhibition 'Echoes and Transformations', White Conduit Projects, London, 20 Oct – 9 Nov 2016. Publication: 'Echoes and Transformations', edition of 40, 2016, 50x70cm. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZpoxDTVukk>

Bio:

Wiebke Leister is a German artist and writer based in London. She is course leader for MA Photography at London College of Communication, co-organizer of the Photography and the Contemporary Imaginary Research Hub and a core member of the Photography and the Archive Research Centre at University of the Arts London. Her research investigates conditions of photographic Non-Likeness, in particular presentations of expressive signs of the face in relation to its facial canvas.